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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses questions and concerns of Head Start staff who strive to develop and implement programs to meet the needs of preschoolers who are linguistically and culturally different. The first concern addressed is the educational rights of children whose primary language is not English, and the nature of language assistance programs provided by Head Start. Preventing erroneous interpretation of linguistic and cultural differences as learning disabilities or behavior disorders and consequent inappropriate referrals of children is the second concern discussed in the paper. This is followed by some important questions about second language acquisition: what are the typical characteristics of children who are learning two languages; how can English be taught effectively as a second language; and how can Head Start teachers become role models for children who are learning a second language? In addition, developmentally appropriate strategies and practice for linguistically and culturally different preschoolers are considered, such as acceptance and respect of their language and culture, and promotion of pride in their linguistic talents. The final concern is ways of collaborating and communicating with parents of these children to promote their preschool success. Four categories of behavior are examined--sharing space, touching, eye contact, time ordering of interactions--that must be taken into account while communicating with families of differing cultural backgrounds. The paper concludes that the most challenging task facing the Head Start staff is to serve a multicultural population. Contains a 13-item bibliography and a list of additional resources. (BAC)

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MORE THAN ONE LANGUAGE: A CHALLENGE TO HEAD START

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INTRODUCTION

The American education system is becoming much more culturally diverse, a trend that educators foresee continuing to the end of the decade and beyond. Signs of the trend were evident as early as 1987 when over 170,000 people under the age of 20 legally immigrated to the United States. Their primary regions of origin were Asia and South America with the countries of Mexico, the Philippines, Korea, the Dominican Republic, and Jamaica contributing the most immigrant children (U.S. Children and Their Families, 1989). Demographics show that by the end of the 1990s, there will be many school districts where most of the children come from families of ethnic, linguistic, and racial minority groups (Quality Education for Minorities Project, 1990). Children, who come from homes where a language other than English is spoken present new challenges for Head Start programs.

There are many examples of effective programs for children in grades K-12 who are linguistically and culturally different. However, very little research has been done on meeting the needs of children who are between ages 3-5. This resource file will address the most compelling questions and concerns of Head Start

staff who are striving to develop and implement developmentally appropriate programs for preschool children.

In order to best meet the needs of this diverse population, Head Start programs need to discuss the implications of special education, the common problems in distinguishing a "disability" from a cultural or linguistic difference, and an educational framework to serve families with children in the Head Start community whose primary language is not English.

There are four crucial aspects of second language education that the Head Start community must address:

- the characteristics of children whose primary language is not English
- the differences between language differences and language disorders
- the impact of language and culture on the child
- the role of teacher and parent

DEFINITIONS

In the United States the term *linguistic minority* or *language minority* refers to a child who is a native speaker of a language other than English. Within this category there is wide diversity. The term may refer to children with varying degrees of literacy who have just migrated with their families to the United States; to children who are living in the United States and are learning both languages simultaneously; to second generation families who

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prefer to speak English at work and their native language at home; and finally to migrant children who may be represented in any of the above descriptions. Table 1 illustrates the variety of terms in use. For example, the term "Limited English Proficient" (LEP) often cited in the literature points to a child's limitation rather than a child's strength. The definitions proposed by Soto (1991) shown in Table 1 demonstrate the range of concepts related to second language education.

Table 1

TERMS USED IN SECOND LANGUAGE EDUCATION

Linguistic Minority Child	speaks the language of a minority group, e.g., Vietnamese
Linguistic Majority Child	speaks language of the majority group, i.e., English in the U.S.
Limited English Proficient	any language background (LEP) child who has limited speaking skills in English as a second language
Non-English Proficient (NEP)	has no previous experience learning English; speaks only the home language
English Only (EO)	is monolingual English speaker
Fluent English Proficient	speaks both English and another language at home. This student speaks English fluently, e.g., ethnically diverse student born in the U.S. who speaks a second language at home.

For the purpose of this resource file the terms that will be used interchangeably are children who are linguistically and culturally different and children whose primary language is not English. It is important to note here that language and cultural differences are considered strengths. The language and culture of children and their families should be viewed as part of the *solution* rather than as part of the problem. These differences are not deficits, and they should not be considered disabling conditions. Also, lack of English proficiency should not be a barrier to success in Head Start.

EDUCATIONAL RIGHTS OF CHILDREN WHOSE PRIMARY LANGUAGE IS NOT ENGLISH

Head Start programs are legally obligated to provide language assistance for children whose native language is not English. This obligation applies to children from families of all ethnic, linguistic, or national origins, including undocumented immigrants. The educational rights of children whose primary language is not English are established and guaranteed by the Constitution, federal legislation, state laws, federal courts, and the Supreme Court.

- The basis for the rights of children whose primary language is not English is found in the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which guarantees equal protection for all persons.

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- In Lau v. Nichols (1974) the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that school districts must take positive steps to assist all children whose primary language is not English to gain proficiency in English, and to provide them with a meaningful and effective education.

- In Plyler v. Doe (1982) the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the state has an obligation to provide free public education to undocumented, immigrant children.

What types of language assistance programs are generally provided by Head Start?

- Most often, the curriculum is taught in English; special instructional assistance is offered to children whose primary language is not English. The wide diversity of children makes it simply impossible to offer instruction in each native language.

- Bilingual programs may be offered in areas of high populations of one language group. However, in such bilingual programs there may also be a few children from yet another group who are now faced with not one but with two new languages. Thus special instructional assistance must be offered to each child whose primary language is not English no matter what country the child is from, what the native language is, or how many children from another ethnic or language background attend the program.

What are the rights of children whose primary language is not English?

- All children have the right to participate in a program that will meet their needs and will ensure that they learn English in order to succeed in our educational system.

- If standardized tests are used, children have the right to take tests that are free of cultural bias. Screening must be done in the language that the children speak.

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What are the rights of undocumented immigrants?

- Children of undocumented parents who reside in the U.S. have the same educational rights as other children in this country.
- It is illegal for Head Start programs to ask about the immigrant status of children or their families.
- Head Start programs may not require identification papers (such as a green card, social security number, or resident status forms) from children or families.
- The program cannot refuse to enroll a child who does not have a birth certificate. The program can only request proof of address, such as appears on the telephone or electric bill.
- The Head Start program may require immunization against certain diseases, before a child can be enrolled. If a parent does not have records to prove immunization, a child can receive the necessary vaccinations through Head Start, a local health clinic, or a community advocacy group.

PREVENTING INAPPROPRIATE REFERRALS OF CHILDREN WHO ARE LINGUISTICALLY AND CULTURALLY DIFFERENT

Children who are linguistically and culturally different are frequently referred to special education because teachers and evaluators erroneously interpret certain linguistic and cultural characteristics as evidence of learning disabilities. Such children are often wrongly categorized as mentally retarded, psychologically/behaviorally disordered, or as having speech or language impairments. Consequently, children are isolated

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and denied equal access to educational programs. A brief description of each of the above diagnostic categories will be useful to avoid misinterpretation and inappropriate referrals.

Mental Retardation

One misinterpreted category in special education is mental retardation, a condition that may arise from a wide variety of causes. Mental retardation is an impairment of intellectual functioning and/or adaptive behaviors. "Intellectual functioning" refers to the results of individual intelligence tests. "Adaptive behavior" refers to the degree to which an individual meets the personal independence and social responsibility expected of his or her age and cultural group.

It is important to note here that most standardized tests are culturally biased. The content of the test may seem foreign to the child and the examiners may be unfamiliar with the child's culture. Limited proficiency in English, language variations, unfamiliarity with test conditions, and lack of motivation are also critical factors that influence a child's test performance. The label mentally retarded is often a misused classification for children who are linguistically and culturally different.

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Psychological/Behavioral Disorders

Children and their families who are linguistically and culturally different, particularly recent immigrants, may be undergoing extreme stress and cultural shock. They may be exhibiting symptoms of psychological disorders. For example, children who have come from war torn areas such as Southeast Asia, Central America, the Middle East, and some countries of Europe, may have witnessed death, assassination, or experienced evacuation hardships. These experiences may affect their ability to learn, develop relationships, and adjust to their settings. Thus many children who are linguistically and culturally different may also be diagnosed as having psychological disorders. It is important to note here that only a qualified bilingual psychiatrist or psychologist can make a diagnosis of a psychological disorder.

In other cases, children who are behaving appropriately for their own cultural group, may seem abnormal in the context of Anglo-American culture. These children may be erroneously labeled as having behavioral disorders.

Speech or Language Impairment

Another category of special education comprises speech and/or language impairment. Developmental errors in syntax, articulation, and vocabulary made by second language learners are

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often wrongly interpreted as evidence of a speech or language impairment. Assessment procedures that focus on the mastery of surface structure of language (e.g., phonology, syntax, grammar, etc.) rather than on the ability to understand and communicate meaning (e.g., pragmatic criteria) may also result in an inaccurate diagnosis. Therefore, children who are linguistically and culturally different must be tested in their primary language. The test must not simply be translated from English to the children's primary language. Tests used in American schools generally reflect white middle-class class and culture, therefore, they may not capture the strengths and learning styles of a child from a different group.

Teachers must consult qualified bilingual/bicultural speech pathologists and diagnosticians who understand how children acquire English as a second language. This will ensure that children are not inappropriately referred to special education.

IMPORTANT QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER ABOUT SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

In addition to preventing inappropriate referrals, educators must address important questions about second language acquisition.

What are the typical characteristics of children who are learning two languages?

- A silent period is common; silence is simply a sign of learning and adjustment. Children start to speak when they feel comfortable and competent. During this stage, children may not be willing to speak in the second language. However, by use of gestures as well as responses in their home language they will give evidence that they do understand.
- Mixing languages or "code-switching" is common. Code switching means that part of a sentence may be put in one language, the rest in the second language. The term code-switching also refers to switching between two languages or dialects as appropriate to circumstances.
- Routines or formulaic expressions are sometimes used. For example, a child just learning English may use such phrases as "I wanna..." or "Where is it..." as a base for a variety of requests or questions, not all of which are grammatically correct.
- Mistakes in the second language (English, for example) are common. An example would be using the word "foot" or "foots" instead of "feet".
- Children often misapply rules governing plurals and verb tense such as saying "hold" instead of "held" or "goed" instead of "went". The best response is modeling correct language through an expansion or clarification of the child's statement rather than by correcting the child's speech. (Adapted from *Young Lives: Many Languages, Many cultures*, Massachusetts Department of Education, 1992).

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How can Head Start teachers effectively teach English as a second language?

- Speak clearly and slowly using gestures and facial expressions in addition to words to convey meaning.
- Expect errors and consider them indicators of progress through stages of language acquisition.
- Respond to children's intended meanings without demanding correct vocabulary or grammar.
- Provide context and action-oriented activities to clarify meanings and functions of the new language.
- Begin with extensive listening practice, and wait for children to speak when they are ready. Children may understand long before they speak.
- Avoid repetitive drills and use repetitions only as they occur naturally in songs, poetry, games, stories, and rhymes.
- Model appropriate speech. This is the best way to teach language.

How can teachers create positive experiences for children who speak English as a second language?

- Foster a positive, caring attitude among children of all language backgrounds by pronouncing their names properly, learning a few key phrases such as "Are you hurt?" or "Do you want to use the bathroom?", and using a few of their favorite words.
- Plan small-group and paired activities that lessen anxiety and promote cooperation when children play.
- Provide opportunities for social interaction with English speaking peers during dramatic play, water play and at mealtimes.
- Vary methodology, materials, and evaluation techniques to suit different learning styles. Children who are linguistically and culturally different may come to Head Start with a wide range of language skills in both their first and second language.
- Build understanding and acceptance of cultural diversity by studying and discussing the values and customs of the children they work with.

How can Head Start teachers become role models for children who are learning a second language?

- Model language that is meaningful, natural, useful, and relevant to children.
- Provide language input that is a little beyond the children's current proficiency level, but that can still be understood.
- Plan for a variety of input from different people, so that children learn to understand both formal and informal speech, different functions of speech, and individual differences in style and register.

STRATEGIES FOR APPROPRIATE PROGRAMS FOR CHILDREN WHO ARE LINGUISTICALLY AND CULTURALLY DIFFERENT

Developmentally appropriate strategies for children who are linguistically and culturally different are designed to reinforce the strengths of each individual child and family. Developmentally appropriate programs are designed to meet the needs of all children and to provide programming that is personally meaningful within the context of the child's culture, primary language, and family (Nissani, 1990).

According to Jim Cummins, a bilingual special educator, a positive attitude and a positive self-concept are necessary ingredients for achieving maximum learning potential especially for the culturally and linguistically different populations. He also stresses that Head Start programs should accept and respect the language and culture of their preschoolers, and help them to feel confident enough to risk getting involved in the learning process, which

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includes making mistakes (Cummins, 1991). Head Start programs can ensure a climate that is welcoming to all families and that promotes the preschoolers' pride in their linguistic talents by carrying out the following guidelines:

- Reflect the various cultural groups in the Head Start program by providing signs in the main offices and elsewhere that welcome people in the different languages of the community.
- Provide opportunities for preschoolers to use their first language in the program whenever they wish.
- Create and encourage opportunities for preschoolers from the same ethnic group to communicate with one another in their first language in cooperative learning groups on at least some occasions.
- Recruit volunteers who can speak the child's first language.
- Provide books written in the children's first languages in the reading section.
- Incorporate greetings and information in various languages in newsletters and in other official Head Start communications.
- Post bilingual and/or multilingual signs that represent all languages spoken by children in the classroom.
- Display pictures and objects of the various cultures represented in the Head Start classroom.
- Create activities such as songs and games that incorporate languages other than English.
- Encourage parents who speak the children's languages to help in the classroom, the playground, and on field trips.
- Encourage children to use their first language during presentations to parents and on other official occasions.
- Invite people from linguistic and culturally diverse groups to act as resource personnel and to speak to children in both formal and informal settings. (Adapted from *Empowering Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students with Learning Problems*, 1991)

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DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE PRACTICE

While Head Start programs are based on the concept of developmentally appropriate practices, many teachers find themselves hard pressed to decide what constitutes appropriate curriculum for children who are linguistically and culturally different.

Teaching a diverse population makes it difficult to assess each child's progress in each area of development. In order to design appropriate programs, Head Start teachers need to understand not only the values of a particular culture, but also its goals for socialization, its beliefs about the nature of children, and its various child-rearing techniques. In addition, developmental milestones or expectations vary from culture to culture.

Some Head Start teachers may wonder whether it is possible to design a developmentally appropriate curriculum that addresses the needs of children from diverse cultures who do not speak the same language. How well a young child speaks his/her home language is more important than how well he/she might speak English. A child might be verbally gifted when speaking the home language but may speak English haltingly, if at all. However, English is being learned by a natural approach rather than by formal instruction.

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Interactive styles familiar to the child should be used, including use of the child's home language. Many teachers see preschool programs as an opportunity to promote the rapid acquisition of English. This may not be developmentally appropriate practice. Children at the age of 3 and 4 are still in the process of developing their first language. The consequences of very early second acquisition may not be beneficial to all young children. Dr. Wong-Fillmore suggests that young children who rapidly learn their second language may do so at the cost of losing interest and ability in their first or home language. Children must be encouraged to use their first language even as they are learning English. The first language is the primary model of communication between young children and their parents (Wong-Fillmore, in press). Children are socialized to take part in their home and community activities through the home language. Given the importance of Head Start supporting families, consideration must be given to the goals and objectives of early childhood education for children who are linguistically and culturally different.

Family values that promote learning should be reinforced. For example Hmong children learn to be attentive to their elders who orally explain their history and traditions. Unlike American children, Hmong children are not expected to ask direct questions when they do not understand a story. Thus it is important to explain differences in program goals to the parents so that they can cooperate and foster positive attitudes toward preschool success.

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Different cultural patterns and attitudes at home and at Head Start must be dealt with directly. Head Start staff, as well as parents, have to become aware of possible discrepancies between culture at home and at programs. Children who are linguistically and culturally different may often find themselves trying to respond to these conflicting expectations. For example, Latino children may be expected to be quiet around adults at home but to "speak up" to the teacher in the classroom.

It should also be recognized that the same content may have different meaning to different groups of children. In Navajo culture, bears are usually depicted as wicked creatures somewhat similar to the role of wolves in European folk tales. A story about Smoky the Bear might be understood by Navajo children differently from the way non-Navajo children might understand it. This can result in confusion for both the teacher and the children. Alternative stories might have to be considered (Nissani, 1990). Because children do not all develop in the same way even when they all share the same language and culture, it is not appropriate to use the same techniques for all children.

PARENT INVOLVEMENT AND COMMUNICATION ISSUES

Most parents of children who are linguistically and culturally different have high aspirations for their children and want to be

involved in promoting their preschool success. However, they often do not know how to help their children and many times are excluded from participation because they do not speak English (Wong-Fillmore, in press). Therefore, it is important that Head Start staff change any exclusionary pattern to one of collaboration. Head Start teachers should work closely with other staff who are proficient in the second language in order to communicate effectively and respectfully with parents.

To enhance communication with parents Head Start staff can follow these guidelines when sending home notes or messages:

- Send messages home in the parents' native language or through a family member.
- Use an appropriate reading level (remember some parents themselves do not know English).
- Listen and respond to messages being returned.

Head Start staff must be courteous and sincere, and give ample opportunity for parents to convey their concerns. Time spent listening to feedback will help promote positive relationships between parents and Head Start programs. During meetings, it is important for parents to be able to respond without the staff interrupting. Parents might speak slowly and use English incorrectly. It is important to listen with empathy and realize that parents can become more involved as their understanding of programs and policies increases. Skepticism and even hostility are normal as parents attempt to sort out new information.

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Unfortunately, much of the literature describing individuals from linguistically and culturally diverse groups reinforces existing stereotypes. No one set of characteristics can be ascribed to all members of any ethnic group. Instead, the cultural traits of individuals range from those traditionally attributed to the ethnic group to those of a person who has been totally assimilated by the mainstream culture. In communicating with families from different cultural groups it is important to keep in mind their diverse cultural styles.

The following four categories of behavior are examples of ones that differ from one culture to another and should be considered when communicating with families of differing cultural backgrounds.

Sharing Space

People from different cultures use and share space differently. In some cultures it is considered appropriate for people to stand very close to each other while talking, whereas in other cultures people feel more comfortable when they stand farther apart. For some Asian cultures, distance is kept from the speaker who has authority in the family or business. These different rules can result in misinterpretation. For example, Latino cultures often view Americans as distant because they prefer more space between speakers. On the other hand, Americans often view individuals who stand too close as being pushy or as invading their private space.

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Touching

Rules for touching others vary from culture to culture. In Latino cultures, two people engaged in conversation often touch and individuals usually embrace when greeting each other. In other cultures, people may be more restrained in their greetings. In the Asian/Vietnamese cultures, for example, it is not customary to shake hands with individuals of the opposite sex or to pat the head of a child. Many Chinese do not like to be touched by people they do not know. A smile is preferred over a pat on the back or a similar gesture.

Eye Contact

In various cultures there are strict rules of eye contact etiquette. Among African Americans it is customary for listeners to avert their eyes, whereas Americans of European descent prefer to make direct eye contact while listening. Among Latinos, avoidance of direct eye contact is sometimes seen as a sign of attentiveness and respect, while sustained direct eye contact may be interpreted as a challenge to authority. Among Asians it may be a sign of disrespect to look at a speaker directly.

Time Ordering of Interactions

The maxim "business before pleasure" reflects the "one activity at a time" mindset of American mainstream culture. Some cultures, however, are polychronic: that is, people typically handle several

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activities at the same time. Before getting down to business, Latinos and Japanese generally exchange lengthy greetings, pleasantries, and talk of things unrelated to the business at hand. Social interactions and business may continue to be interwoven throughout the conversation. (Adapted from *Communicating with Culturally Diverse Parents of Exceptional Children*, 1991)

CONCLUSION

Head Start serves a population with unique educational needs involving language, values, and beliefs. How best to meet these needs in the classroom is one of the most challenging tasks that Head Start staff will encounter. Head Start classrooms include children from immigrant families and children from native-born American families who speak a language other than English as well as English speaking children. In identifying a child as a member of a particular language group, one must not separate the language from the particular cultural context in which it is spoken. Different cultures may share a common language and yet vary greatly. French-speaking children from Haiti, Canada, and France, for example, represent very different cultural and linguistic populations. The same is true of Latino children from Puerto Rico, Spain, and Colombia; African American children who speak Black American English; and English speaking children from England, Australia, New Zealand and the U.S.A.

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The role of Head Start staff is not an easy one, especially if there are several children who are learning English as a second language. It is important for staff not to prejudge or interpret behavior solely on the basis of their experiences and values. Only by continually talking with children and families can staff understand the culture and values of others, and appreciate the unique contributions they have to offer to the Head Start community.

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